



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

O'Leary, CP ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4097-8439>
(2019) Public Service Motivation: a rationalist critique. Public Personnel
Management, 48 (1). pp. 82-96. ISSN 0091-0260

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/620974/>

Version: Accepted Version

Publisher: SAGE Publications

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091026018791962>

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been a rapid growth of interest in, and empirical research around, the concept of public service motivation, with as many as 136 articles published in 2013/14 alone (Ritz, Brewer and Neuman, 2016). Despite this growing popularity, there are few studies that critique public service motivation theory (PSM) (Bozeman and Su, 2014), and none do so from a rationalist perspective. Given that the origins of PSM lie in attempts by public administration scholars to counter rationalist explanations of bureaucratic behaviour, this lack of counter-criticism or response is surprising. This article provides a rationalist critique of Public Service Motivation. It does so by responding to two assumptions about rational choice made by PSM scholars, and by identifying two significant gaps in the PSM construct. First, PSM scholars tend to position public service motivation against, and as opposite to, an assumption of egotistical motivation that they associate with rational choice theory. By not differentiating between rationality as formal structure and rationality as the substantive content of preferences, academics in the field miss an obvious point: that public service motivation is entirely consistent with an assumption of a particular type of non-instrumental rationality, namely expressive interests. To develop this point, I consider the understanding of altruism that underlies PSM, arguing that it is a form of ‘warm glow’ altruism, and is thus consistent with expressive interests.

Secondly, norms, and particularly the norm of public service, are core to PSM. PSM scholars assume that norms are not consistent with rational choice theory and, as such, the role that public service norms play in PSM cannot be explained within a rationalist framework. I respond to this, arguing that PSM scholars have ignored a significant area of rationalist theoretical and empirical work that sees norms as incentives and constraints on human behaviour, and, as such, public service norms and the role they play in public service motivation are entirely consistent with rational choice theory.

I then argue that there are two substantive gaps in PSM as it is currently conceptualised. The first significant gap is the lack of ‘the public’ in public service motivation – how do those who are claimed to be working for the public interest define, understand and further that public interest, and how do they resolve conflicts between different publics? The second significant gap is that PSM focuses only on motivation, but has little to say about decision-making. This is a significant gap, particularly in relation to civil servants. For civil servants make many decisions in their work, often collective decisions. I argue that viewing PSM as a form of rational motivation, and therefore consistent with rational choice theory, resolves both of these gaps.

What is Public Service Motivation?

There are several definitions of public service motivation (Bozeman and Su, 2014)(Perry and Hondeghem, 2008), which in part reflects its conceptual development since the early 1990s. In a seminal article published in 1990, Perry and Wise defined public service motivation as a pro-social motivation to serve the public interest and thereby help others. They define public service motivation as a pre-disposition to “respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organisations” (Perry and Wise, 1990). This definition is used or referred to in most articles and books published in the field. It associates public service motivation with public sector employment or public institutions, although later development of the concept of PSM has moved away from such an association. And while much empirical work is still focused on the public sector, more recently there has been much discussion around public service motivation in other areas and there is a growing recognition that public service motivation is found outside the public sector (Bozeman and Su, 2014).

Public service motivation versus rational self-interested behaviour

The origins of PSM theory lie in the attempts of public administration scholars to counter rationalist explanations of bureaucratic behaviour (Prebble, 2014)(Ritz, 2011). Many definitions of public service motivation are made in relation to, and in contrast with, these rationalist explanations. In doing so, they make several assumptions about the nature of rationality. For example, in their book *Motivation in Public Management: The Call of Public Service* (2008), James Perry and Annie Hondeghem state that:

“beginning with the intellectual landmarks such as Anthony Downs’ ‘Inside Bureaucracy’ (Downs, 1967) and William Niskanen’s ‘Bureaucracy and Representative Government’, bureaucrats were painted as quite consistently as rational and self-interested. Given these assumptions, scenarios about bureaucratic behavior depicted bureaucrats as budget-maximizing, self-aggrandizers incapable of discerning and pursuing the public will.”(emphasis in original)

Likewise, Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) and Brewer and Seldon (1998) suggest that public service motivation is an alternative to private interest forms of rationality and Ritz (2011) states that it is a reaction to the one-dimensional selfish behavioural motivation inherent in rational choice theory. Perry and Wise (1990) contrasted it with approaches which assume “that people are motivated primarily by self-interest”. Similarly, Vandenabeele defines PSM as “the beliefs, values, and attitudes *that go beyond self-interest*” (2007)(my emphasis), and Houston (2006) states that civil servants “act out of a commitment to the common good rather than mere self-interest”. A number of other PSM authors also associate rationality with self-interest, and in doing so conflate an assumption of rationality as formal structure with an assumption of self-interest as substantive content. By associating rationality with

selfishness, PSM scholars have ignored a more substantive view of rationality that sees rationality as being that individuals have their own preferences which affect the decisions they make (Buchanan and Tullock, 1965 as cited in Ostrom and Ostrom, 2014) and that rational preferences may be altruistic (Opp, 2013) or other regarding. Indeed, for over half a century, economists and political scientists have, in the words of George Akerlof, “..augmented standard economics to take into account all sorts of different motivations...”. (Akerlof and Kranton, 2010).

Even the two fathers of public choice identified by Perry and Hondeghe in the above quote, Anthony Downs and William Niskanen, recognise that self-interest is only one form of rational motivation for civil servants. Niskanen, author of one of the most important rational choice explanations of bureaucracy, acknowledged that some civil servants would “undoubtedly try to serve (their perception of) the public interest” (1974). And Anthony Downs argued that the motivations of civil servants are complex, and identified five types of bureaucrat, only one of which is motivated purely by self-interest. Indeed, Downs defined one of his bureaucrat types as “mixed-motive officials”, whom he describes as having goals that combine self-interest and altruism (Downs, 1967). In doing so, Downs makes it clear that many different motivations are consistent with rationality as the formal structure of decision-making.

In this view, rationality is not limited to self-interested behaviour; rather, rationality is assumed to be purposeful or goal-orientated behaviour, where the purpose or goal being pursued may not be instrumental or self-interested. (Munger; 2011). Indeed, so much empirical evidence has been published that counters the narrow, selfish definition of rationality assumed by PSM scholars that “a significant number of economists have now abandoned it and at least six (of whom)....(Frederick Hayek, Gunnar Myrdal, Herbert Simon,

Ronald Coase, Amartya Sen and Daniel Kahneman) have been awarded Nobel prizes...”
(Hodgson, 2012).

This is not to suggest that PSM scholars do not recognise the role of rationality or even self-interested behaviour in public service motivated individuals. Nor do I suggest PSM theory is constructed in such a way that self-interested behaviour is inconsistent with PSM. Indeed, Perry and Wise (1990) state that public service motivation is rational, norm-based, and affective, that “public service motivation is sometimes grounded in individual utility maximisation”, and the rational aspects of PSM are covered by the ‘Attraction to Policy Making’ dimension underlying much empirical work in the field. Rather, I argue that many of the ‘other regarding’ aspects of PSM are entirely consistent with rationality and, as such, PSM should be seen as part of the families of rationalities. I also argue that the two significant gaps in the PSM construct can be resolved if PSM is seen as consistent with rational behaviour.

Expressive interests and public service motivation

Since the 1960s, a growing number of rational choice academics have accepted and incorporated non-instrumental, other regarding preferences into their understanding of human decision-making. While some may trace the antecedents of this to the works of Adam Smith or David Hume, the real interest arose following the publication of Anthony Down’s classic 1957 work *Economic Theory of Democracy* and the resulting emergence of the paradox of voting. In his original turnout model, Downs took into account only instrumental or extrinsic motivation to explain why people vote. He proposed a model to explain a rational actor’s decision to vote as a function of (a) the benefit of her preferred candidate being elected, and (b) the probability that her vote will be decisive, being greater than (c) the cost to her of voting. The paradox arises because such an instrumental model would predict almost zero

turnout, yet so many people do turn out to vote, meaning either those voters were acting irrationally, or some ‘other-regarding’ individual preferences not accounted for in the model were part of voters’ rational calculation.

In response to this paradox, in an oft cited article in the American Political Science Review, William Riker and Peter Ordeshook amended Downs’ model to account for non-instrumental, expressive motivations (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968 as cited in Herne and Setälä, 2004). Schuessler says that they are expressively motivated; voting is a “means of expressing political beliefs and preferences and, in doing so, to establish or reaffirm their own political identity.” (2000), and that such expression is valuable to the individual in its own right (Hamlin and Jennings, 2011). Expressive behaviour is defined as being non-instrumental and separate from material utility. It is about individuals confirming aspects of their “beliefs, values, ideology, identity or personality” (Hamlin and Jennings, 2011) regardless of the outcome and as such is valuable to the individual in its own right. As such, expressive action is action that is rewarding in of itself. As Gabor Toka states that the “hallmark of expressive action is that the reward of bearing the costs of a particular action is intrinsic to the activity itself” (Toka, 2009).

While much of the work around expressive utility has been around voting behaviour, it is not limited to this single arena. Hamlin and Jennings, for example, argue that expressive motivations can be found “across the range of ... behaviour (2011) and that expressive behaviour is relevant across all institutional contexts”. In his book *Rational Lives*, Dennis Chong argues that expressive behaviour encompasses all forms of political action. Chong suggests that such expressive behaviour refers to “enjoyment or value-expressive action” and further states that the “hallmark of expressive action is that the benefit of taking such action is inseparable from the process of taking the action” (Chong, 2000). Similarly Hillman (2010) identifies a number of types of expressive behaviour, including expressive voting, expressive

rhetoric, and expressive generosity. While academic interest in expressive choice has grown considerably in recent years, there are still a number of conceptual difficulties. There is no single, commonly agreed definition of the concept: several scholars focus on expressive choice as being about identity (Arye Hillman, for example, or recent work by the Nobel Prize winning economist, George Akerlof) whereas others take a wider view (Colin Jennings and Alan Hamlin, for example). Much of the literature focuses on expressive choice in relation to voting; others identify different forms and contexts of expressive choice and include duty, morality and beliefs as being important aspects of expressive behaviour. While there is agreement that expressive and material utility are two sides of the same coin and, when summed, give an actor's overall utility, there is little discussion about how and when rational actors decide whether to act to further their expressive or material utility. There is, however, agreement that an individual's expressive and material interests might conflict. They may also complement each other, and here may be a trade-off between them (Hamlin and Jennings, 2011). A number of proponents of expressive choice suggest that such behaviour is often low-cost in nature (for example, Hillman, 2010).

There is a striking similarity between the type of expressive behaviour outlined by these authors and the intrinsic motivation that leads some individuals to exhibit public service motivation. Indeed, Arye Hillman goes so far as to say that expressive behaviour explains "intrinsic behaviour" (his speech marks)(2010). The conception of intrinsic motivation that is core to PSM theory draws heavily on self-determination theory. Alan Waterman, in discussing different concepts of intrinsic motivation, argues that interests, expressiveness and enjoyment are all related to identity and to intrinsic motivation (Waterman, 2005). Waterman further states that expressiveness embodies a person's core sense of being and of their identity. I therefore argue that expressive behaviour is a fundamental part of the original conception of intrinsic motivation that is so key to public service motivation. It is also clear

that enjoyment of an activity as a reward in of itself, for how undertaking the activity allows individuals to confirm aspects of their identity that are important to them, are key to both the concepts of intrinsic motivation and expressive behaviour.

As such, the public service motivation identified in PSM theoretical and empirical work should be conceptualized as expressive behaviour and thus as being entirely consistent with rationality. To think of public service motivation as a form of expressive behaviour resolves many of the theoretical gaps in PSM. Because we no longer need to think of public service motivation as being a different form of motivation, which some people have more of at various points in their lives, the key causal questions that PSM fails to address – namely, where does the altruism and prosocial motivation of those expressing public service motivation come from and why do some people have greater levels of public service motivation than others – are no longer significant. All human beings engage in both instrumental and expressive behaviour.

The ‘altruism’ underpinning public service motivation

To further support my argument that PSM is a form of expressive behaviour and is therefore consistent with, and not an alternative to, rational choice theory, I argue that the understanding of altruism that underpins PSM is entirely consistent with the concept of expressive interests set out above. I will support this argument by both considering how altruism is operationalised and measured in PSM, and also by assessing the definition of altruism that underlies this measurement.

Central to PSM is the idea that some people are essentially more altruistic than others.

Altruism is core to definitions of public service motivation and to specific tools for measuring public service motivation. A measurement scale for PSM was developed by James Perry in

1996. This has four dimensions for measuring public service motivation, of which one - self-sacrifice - contains the altruism that is core to PSM. Self-sacrifice is the extent to which an individual foregoes private interests to serve others. Self-sacrifice is key to the whole of public service motivation (Kim and Vandenabeele, 2010): indeed, it is the foundation for the other PSM dimensions (Andersen et al, 2012).

The Perry (1996) PSM dimension tool covers four areas and provides over forty statements to measure levels of public service motivation in individuals. The self-sacrifice (altruism) dimension contains eight statements (variables) used to measure the extent to which a respondent exhibits altruism. These eight statements are illustrated in table 1.

Insert table 1 here

It is worth considering these variables or statements in more detail. Several seem related to the respondent's sense of identity and, in particular, how such individuals would confirm and demonstrate such important aspects of their identity, their sense of duty or their beliefs. PSM 5, for example, talks about an actor putting duty first, which implies that she has an understanding of what duty entails, an appreciation that duty is important and a desire to be seen by others to be doing her duty, all of which would be entirely consistent with expressive behaviour. PSM 12 involves an actor getting a 'good feeling' from working for the public good; a warm-glow from their allegedly altruistic behaviour. That is, the actor is undertaking action which is rewarding *in of itself*, and is undertaking that action for the reward they receive, which is consistent with the concept of expressive behaviour. . . PSM 1, 6, 12, 19 and 26 all examine the extent to which an individual is willing to trade off instrumental benefits to gain expressive benefits. PSM 1, for example, asks respondents about the extent to which "making a difference to society" is more important than personal gain. Equally, PSM 19 asks

about the willingness to make a personal loss to help another person, which again relates to an individual's willingness to trade material for expressive benefits. Rationalists expect that rational individuals would trade off between expressive and material interests (Hamlin and Jennings, 2011). That the self-sacrifice domain in Perry's (1996) PSM dimension tools so explicitly accounts for such trade-offs indicates that public service motivation is a form of expressive behaviour and is therefore entirely consistent with rational choice theory. Indeed, this trade-off between material and expressive benefits is recognised in the definition of altruism that underpins PSM. Altruism is commonly defined as an individual acting to benefit others *regardless* of costs to themselves. This is very different to the concept of altruism used by Perry in his PSM scale. Perry draws on the definition of altruism given by John Macy, who stated that altruism is "the willingness of public servants to forego financial rewards for the *intangible rewards they receive from serving the public*" (Macy, 1971 as cited in Perry, 1996)(my emphasis). Thus, Perry's understanding of altruism (as it applies to PSM, the understanding that is core to the PSM scale and its use in much PSM empirical work) is what Andreoni defines as egoistical or warm-glow altruism (1989, as cited in Jankowski, 2002). In providing service for others, individuals experience a 'warm-glow', some personal reward which is in itself the motivation for servicing the public good. When an actor receives some utility from giving or providing to others, and this utility is independent from the benefit to the recipient, that actor is engaging in expressive behaviour. .

Norms and public service motivation

Norms play an important role in PSM, and particularly the idea of public service as an important norm. This is captured by the commitment to the public interest domain in Perry's PSM scale (1996). And PSM scholars assume that norms are inconsistent with rationality. This is an important assumption because, as with the assumption that rationality is limited to

self-interest, it leads PSM scholars to position PSM as an alternative to rationality. In responding to this assumption, I argue that the kind of norm-based behaviour discussed in the PSM is entirely consistent with rational choice theory.

There are, of course, questions about the extent to which rational choice theorists have provided satisfactory explanations of compliance with norms. Festre (2010) and Opp (2013) suggest that some rationalists do not believe that norm-following can be explained by rational choice, which Opp calls 'autonomy' thesis, and associates with the work of Jon Elster, Lars Udehn and March and Olsen. Opp distinguishes this 'autonomy' thesis from a view of norms as incentives, in which norms are "a component of the utility function of individuals".

There has been much recent interest with rational choice theory around the role of norms. For Sue Crawford and Elinor Ostrom, norms are a type of institution distinct from strategies and rules (1995), where institutions are 'the rules of the game' (North, 1990; p3) that incentivise and constrain human political, social and economic interaction and exchange. Norms develop with, and are learnt from, our interactions with each other (Ostrom; 2014); they are moral codes of behaviour (Benabou and Tirole, 2006) that helps us decide how to act (Festre, 2010) and what we expect from each other in particular contexts or situations. Norms are the constraints that structure our interactions (North, 1990). For Elinor Ostrom, humans lack complete information and are unable to consider all of the available options when interacting with others. Norms thus provide 'rules of thumb' that enable us to deal with this lack of information (Ostrom, 2014).

PSM scholars choose to ignore this incentives thesis in RCT and instead choose to focus on the autonomy thesis. PSM scholars assume that rationality completely excludes norm-based motivations. As with their narrowing of rationality to only include selfish, material interests, this underplays the complexity and completeness of rational choice theories. But the understanding and application of norms as incentives and constraints to behaviour developed

by rational choice scholars and as outlined above is very similar to many arguments about norms in the PSM literature. Indeed, it is rationalists' understanding of the process by, and the effect of, individuals internalizing norms that poses one of the greatest threats to the theoretical integrity of PSM. Because one of the core empirical questions addressed by PSM scholars is whether individuals who are public service motivated seek out employment in public service sectors or whether such employment leads to increase levels of public service motivation in some individuals. This is to say, does public service motivation come from the internalization of public service norms within public institutions or is public service motivation an inherent characteristic of some parts of the population that leads them to seek out employment in the public service. This is an area of significant interest, and one where there is growing empirical interest. The limited, existing empirical evidence provides mixed findings. Pederson (2013) found that public service motivation predicts individual's preference for public sector employment. In contrast, Wright (2008), Crewson (1997), Lewis and Frank (2002) and Wright and Christiansen (2010) are amongst a number of scholars would have been unable to isolate the effect of public service motivation on employment preference from the effect of employment in the public sector on levels of public service motivation (as cited in Pedersen, 2013).

One study found that education is correlated with public service motivation (Pandey and Stazyk, 2008), though there is some evidence to suggest that type of education or training undertaken might be important. Kjelson (2012), drawing on previous work by Bright (2005) and Perry (1997) tested this empirically, and found some evidence to suggest that the relationship between education and public service motivation could be attributed to the 'professionalising' effect of vocational programmes intended to lead to public service employment or work in professions. Kjelson's research suggests levels of public service motivation might better be explained through internalization of norms rather than inherent

differences in public service motivation. This would suggest that public service norms act in a way that is entirely consistent with a rationalist understanding of norms as incentives and constraints. Norms become internalized when following the norm becomes a form of intrinsic motivation (Opp, 2013) through which the individual attaches some positive or negative costs to taking or not taking particular forms of action (Ostrom and Ostrom, 2014). As such, when norms are internalized, they incentivize and constrain our behaviour. Actors “seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, identity, a membership of a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions” (March and Olsen, 2006; as cited in Opp, 2013).

Of course, this rationalist explanation of the role of norms is not the only available approach. There are many competing explanations: However, the rationalist understanding of norms as incentives or constraints to individual behaviours is entirely consistent the individualist, axiomatic and micro-reductionist underpinnings of PSM. And applying this rationalist norm-incentive thesis to PSM would see commitment to public service as a norm that, when internalized by public sector employees, increases the level of expressed public service motivation and the intrinsic rewards inherent in expressing public service motivation. The norm has developed as the size and extent of the state has grown. Indeed, in several competing explanations of bureaucracy, the public service norm becomes more apparent at the beginning of the twentieth century: Max Weber’s ideal-type bureaucracy, for example, includes an early version of the public service norm where bureaucrats must not use resources or positions for their own personal gain. And, for me, the development of this norm has enabled politicians and civil servants to legitimize the growth in size and scale of the state as this growth is desired by the voting public and delivers services in their interests.

Gaps in Public Service Motivation theory: the lack of public voice in public service motivation

Given the importance of the public interest to public service motivation theory, it is surprising that there is no clear definition of what constitutes the public interest, how civil servants understand the public interest, how civil servants make decisions about furthering the public interest, how civil servants reconcile their individual conceptions of the public interest and group/organizational/political conceptions, and how civil servants receive feedback from, and respond to, the public to ensure the work of their agencies is further the public interest. Or, to draw on the quote from James Perry and Annie Hondeghem (2008) given earlier in this article, PSM as a theory provides no insight as to how civil servants go about “discerning and pursuing the public will” (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). This poses a significant puzzle – if the public are so important to public service motivated civil servants, why is there not a clearly set out theoretical consideration of the role of the public in that public interest?

Some PSM scholars have recognized this gap. Andersen et al, for example, argue that furthering the public interest is “a public value, but we obviously need more concrete values specifying what serving society should include.” (Andersen et al, 2012). Andersen et al go on to argue that civil servants need a clear set of public values that specify what the public interest is and what it means. Here, public values are the “normative principles on which governments and policies should be based and thus provide direction to the behaviour of public servants”. However, Andersen et al do not provide an explanation of how these normative principles are developed, implemented or evaluated. And a significant gap is around how the public might express, ensure or evaluate that their interests are being furthered by these ‘public’ values. There is no feedback loop within the PSM model that enables civil servants to reflect and evaluate whether they are furthering these public values,

whether these public values are in fact ‘public’ and whether they are delivering to the public interest. Indeed, in the extensive PSM literature, the public is rarely mentioned.

One possibility for this lack of discussion of the lack of consideration of the public in public service motivation theory could be found in the politics-administration dichotomy (Wilson, 1887, as cited in Rosenbloom, 2008). In its broader conception, this consisted of a set of arguments to ‘depoliticise’ the work of civil servants, and in PSM terms would see civil servants taking a steer from politicians about what might constitute the public interest, rather than engaging directly with the public or developing their own understanding of how to further the public interest. However, the politics-administration dichotomy is not discussed in the PSM literature. Nor is there reason to believe that it implicitly underpins PSM. Indeed, Perry and Wise (1990) recognise that civil servants will be seek policy making activities to further the interests of certain groups. They recognise that there is no single, coherent ‘public’ but different groups with different interests, and may act to further the interests of certain groups (perhaps to the detriment of other groups). It is also the case that public service motivated civil servants will have ideas about what constitutes good policy, what public policy should look like and how they want to shape that policy. As Gailmard (2010) argues, policy-motivated actors “obtain benefits from effecting what they consider positive changes in public policy” – they have policy preferences of their own and seek to further them. Such motivations appear striking similar to utility maximization motives assumed of rational civil servants by William Niskanen (1970), Anthony Downs (1967), Gordon Tullock (1985) and Patrick Dunleavy (1991), and far from the depoliticised civil servants imagined by discussions around the political-administration dichotomy.

One of the few references to the public in the PSM literature is made by Perry and Hondeghem, who suggest that because “public servants are general altruists, then we (the public) will be inclined to rely on them to do good at all times” (Perry and Hondeghem,

2008). In terms of a developed, testable model, there is a single notable exception contained in a paper presented to the 2007 Midwest Political Science Association conference in Chicago, Illinois (but not subsequently published) by David Houston, Lauren Harding and Abraham Whaley (Houston et al, 2007). David Houston has written much on public service motivation, and in this conference paper attempted to explore the public's perceptions of the motivations of public servants. Houston suggests that civil servants can be conceptualized as public stewards, as "...virtuous, committed caretakers, entrusted with the administration of the commons, guided by the will of the people" (Houston et al, 2007). As such, they are "entrusted with the authority to act on behalf of the people" and should be seen as a "public manager who is both an efficient administrator and a democratic servant". Houston and his colleagues suggest that the public perceive civil servants as public stewards; that the public see their interests best furthered by civil servants, acting on their behalf and therefore entrust civil servants with this task.

They argue that the extant research indicates that civil servants "espouse values and engage in behaviors (sic) that are consistent with the image of a public servant". And they cite a large number of studies (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Orren, 1997; Uslaner, 1993) which show that higher levels of interpersonal trust in members of the public is related to trust in government, which they extend and hypothesize that higher levels of interpersonal trust will be related to greater probability of trusting civil servants as public stewards of the public interest. While not explicit in Houston's argument, the public steward thesis would seem to explain the lack of any theoretical or empirical consideration of the role of the public in this public interest theory. Put simply, the public simply trust civil servants and professionals and there is no need for any feedback mechanism. While Houston and his colleagues acknowledge that general levels of trust in government have decreased in most western democracies in recent years, as evidenced in a number of empirical studies (Dalton, 2005), their proposition that

members of the public simply trust that civil servants are working to further the public interest raises more questions than provides answers.

Gaps in Public Service Motivation theory: how do public service motivated civil servants make individual and collective decisions?

Part of the problem here is that public service motivation theory does not explain how civil servants make individual or collective decisions. PSM scholars emphasize that public service motivation is about individual ***motivation*** (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008); it is about an individual's predisposition (Perry, 1996); it is studied at the level of the individual (Andersen et al, 2012) and much research is around variation in levels of public service motivation between individuals (Gailmard, 2010). And while, in theory, varying degrees of pro-social motivations can be found in all walks of life, all occupations and all sectors of the economy, much of the empirical and practice interest in PSM is still focused on the public sector, on examining levels of PSM within public sector organisations and workforces, and much of this research is cross-sectional or comparative in nature. There is also growing interest in the practical application of PSM in areas of public sector workforce management, with questions raised around how PSM can be used to attract and retain public sector workers, and improve performance of public sector personnel (Christensen, Paarlberg and Perry, 2017).

But civil servants make **decisions**, and these are often ***collective decisions***. They make collective decisions about what constitutes the public interest and how these interests may be furthered; about the allocation of scarce public resources when there are competing ideas as to what might further the public interest, or indeed when there are competing publics. These decisions will affect how many of the public are treated by public organisations, the services they receive and how these services are delivered, as well as how members of the public may view those organisations. They will also have an effect on how public sector workers view

their employers and their jobs. And for many public policy and public administration scholars, it is the decisions that civil servants make, how they are made, by whom and to what end, that is of primary interest. For me, this is a fundamental gap in PSM as a concept and as a body of empirical research.

These two gaps – the lack of the public in public service motivation, and the lack of consideration of how public service motivated individuals go on to make decisions, individually or collectively, are both resolved by seeing public service motivation as expressive interests and therefore consistent with a rationalist understanding of bureaucratic behaviour. Rational civil servants, whose commitment to the public interest is a form of expressive interest, would not be interested in understanding what the public voice, or what public's views of what is the public interest. Rather, they would “undoubtedly try to serve (*their perception of*) the public interest” (Niskanen, 1974)(my emphasis). They may seek to further the interests of certain groups, where those interests are aligned with their instrument or expressive interests. And, more importantly, there is a wealth of rational choice literature around decision making and collective decision making.

Conclusion

The public interest is, of course, the dominant language of civil servants and of public policy. And judged by the number of empirical articles published in the last five years, PSM is the current academic model of choice for explaining the behaviour of civil servants. There have been some interesting articles published and some evidence to suggest that, when asked, civil servants do indeed state that they are, indeed, motivated by the public interest. Yet PSM scholars disagree on how they define public service motivation, whether it is specific to public sector workers or a more general motivation, whether it is an innate preference that leads

some to work in public spirited roles or is it developed through socialisation in public organisations.

Over and above these conceptual problems, for me there are three fundamental issues with PSM theory. First, underlying PSM is the idea that some people are more altruistic than others, and this altruism leads them to seek out opportunities to further the common good. But this is ‘warm glow’ or egotistical altruism; it is not selflessness. Individuals experience a ‘warm-glow’, some personal reward which is in itself the motivation for servicing the public good. When an actor receives some utility from giving or providing to others, and this utility is independent from the benefit to the recipient, then surely the actor is being rational.

The second issue is that the model ignores important questions of how civil servants define the public interest, how civil servants measure whether they are furthering the public interest, what do civil servants do if their actions do not further the public interest, and how do civil servants received feedback on their behaviours and actions from the public they are allegedly serving. PSM also has no answers to give on decision-making – how do public service motivated civil servants and professionals make decisions about how to further the public interest.

In contrast to the multitude of peer-reviewed articles and academic texts published on public service motivation, there has been a distinct lack of interest in recent years in the two main rational choice models of bureaucratic behaviour, Niskanen’s budget maximizing thesis and Dunleavy’s bureau-shaping thesis. This is particularly disappointing because the theoretical flaws inherent to the PSM model can easily be resolved when public service motivation is conceived as being entirely consistent with rationalist understanding of bureaucracy, both in terms of the material and expressive interests of civil servants.

References

- Abelson, R (1995) The secret existence of expressive behaviour, *Critical Review*, Vol.9 no.s 1-2, pp25-34
- Akerlof, G and Kranton, R (2010) *Identity economics: how our identities shape our work, wages and wellbeing*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey
- Anderfuhren-Biget, S, Varone, F and Giauque, D (2014) Policy environment and public service motivation, *Public Administration*, Vol.92 No.4, pp807-825
- Andersen, L, Jorgensen, T, Kjelsen, A, Pedersen, L and Vrangbak, K (2012) Public values and public service motivation: conceptual and empirical relationships, *American Review of Public Administration*, Vol.43 (3), pp292-311
- Bozeman, B and Su, X (2014) Public service motivation concepts and theory: a critique, *Public Administration Review*, (online only) DOI: 10.1111/puar.12248
- Buelens, M and Van den Broeck, H (2007) An analysis of differences in work motivation between public and private sector organisations, *Public Administration Review*, Vol.67 Issue 1, pp 65-74
- Christensen, R, Paarlberg, L and Perry, J (2017) Public service motivation research: lessons for practice, *Public Administration Review*, 77:4, pp529-542
- Chong, D. (2000) *Rational lives: norms and values in politics and society*, University of Chicago Press
- Crawford, S and Ostrom, E (1995) A grammar of institutions, *The American Political Science Review*, 89(3), pp582-600
- Crewson, P (1997) Public service motivation: building empirical evidence of incidence and effect, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 4, 499-518
- DeHart-Davis, L, Marlowe, J and Pandey, S (2006) Gender dimensions of public service motivation, *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 66 No.6, pp873-887

- Downs, A (1957) *Economic theory of democracy*, Harper, New York NY
- Downs, A (1967) *Inside bureaucracy*, Little Brown Publishers, Boston MA
- Dunleavy, P. (1991) *Democracy, bureaucracy and public choice*, Pearson Education, London
- Elster, J (1989) Social norms and economic theory, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol.3, pp99-117
- Festre, A (2010) Incentives and social norms: a motivation-based economic analysis of social norms, *Journal of Economic Surveys*, Vol.24 No.3, pp511-538
- Gailmard, S (2010) Politics, principal-agent problems and public service motivation, *International Public Management Journal*, 13(1) pp35-45
- Gintis, H (2003) Solving the puzzle of prosociality, *Rationality and Society*, 15(2), pp155-187
- Hamlin, A and Jennings, C (2011) Expressive political behaviour: foundations, scope and implications, *British Journal of Political Science*, 41:3, pp645-670
- Herne, K and Setala, M (2004) A response to the critique of rational choice theory: Lakatos' and Laudan's concepts applied, *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 47:1, pp67-85
- Hillman, A (2010) Expressive behaviour in economics and politics, *Public Choice*, 148, pp249-257
- Hodgson, G (2012) On the limits of rational choice theory, *Economic Thought*, Vol.1, pp94-108
- Houston, D (2000) Public service motivation: a multivariate test, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 10(4): 713-727
- Houston, D et al (2007) Understanding public attitudes about government administrators: perceptions of administrators as public stewards, paper presented at

- Mid-West Political Science Association annual conference, Chicago 1997
- Jankowski, R (2002) Buying a lottery ticket to help the poor: altruism, civic duty and self-interest in the decision to vote, *Rationality and Society*, 14(1), pp55-77
- Kim, S and Vandenabeele, W (2010) A strategy for building public service motivation research internationally, *Public Administration Review*, 70, pp701-709
- Kjeldsen, A and Jacobsen, C (2012) Public service motivation and employment sector: attraction or socialization? *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol.23, pp899-926
- Laband, D, Pandit, R, Sophocleous, J and Laband, A (2009) Patriotism, pigskins and politics: an empirical examination of expressive behaviour and voting, *Public Choice*, 138: 97-108
- Munger, M (2011) Self-interest and public interest: the motivations of political actors, *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, 23:3, pp339-357
- Niskanen, W (1974) *Bureaucracy and representative government*, Transaction Publishers, NY, USA
- North, D (1990) *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*, Cambridge University Press
- Opp, K (2013) Norms and rationality: is moral behaviour a form of rational action? *Theory and Decisions*, vol.74, pp383-409
- Ostrom, E and Ostrom, V (2014) *Choice, rules and collective action: the Ostroms on the study of institutions and governance*, ECPR Press, Colchester
- Pedersen, M (2013) Public service motivation and attraction to public versus private sector employment: academic field of study as moderator? *International Public Management Journal*, 16:3, pp357-385
- Perry, J (1996) *Measuring Public Service Motivation: an assessment of construct*

reliability and validity, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol.6 No.1, pp5-22

Perry, J and Hondeghem, A (eds)(2008) *Motivation in public management : the call of public service*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Perry, J and Wise, L (1990) The motivational bases of public service, *Public Administration Review*, 50(3), pp367-373

Perry, J, Hondeghem, A and Wise, L (2010) Revisiting the motivational basis of public service motivation: twenty years of research and an agenda for the future, *Public Administration Review*, 70:5, pp681-690

Prebble, M (2014) Has the study of public service motivation addressed the issues that motivated the study? *American Review of Public Administration*, published online doi: 10.1177/0275074014554651

Rainey, H and Steinbauer, P (1999) Galloping elephants: developing elements of a theory of effective government organizations, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 9(1), pp1-32

Ritz, A (2011) Attraction to public policy-making: a qualitative inquiry into improvements in PSM measurement, *Public Administration*, Vol.89 No.3, pp1128

Ritz , A, Brewer, G and Neumann, O (2016) Public service motivation: a systematic literature review and outlook . *Public Administration Review* 76 (3): 414 – 26

Rosenbloom, D (2008) The politics-administration dichotomy in US historical context, *Public Administration Review*, 68: 1, pp57–60

Schuessler, A (2000) Expressive voting, *Rationality and Society*, 12(1), pp87-119

Tóka G (2009) Expressive versus instrumental motivation of turnout, partisanship and political learning. In: Klingemann H, (eds)(2009) *The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Tullock, G (1984) A (partial) rehabilitation of the public interest theory, *Public Choice*, Vol.42, 89-99

Tullock, G. (1993) *Rent seeking*, Edward Elgar

Vandenabeele, W (2007) Toward a public administration theory of public service motivation, *Public Management Review*, 9(4), pp545-556

Vandenabeele, W (2011) Who wants to deliver public service? Do institutional antecedents of public service motivation provide an answer? *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 31 (1), 87-107

Vandenabeele, W, Brewer, G and Ritz, A (2014) Past, present and future of public service motivation research, *Public Administration*, 92(4), pp779–789

Waterman, A (2005) When effort is enjoyed: two studies of intrinsic motivation for personally salient activities, *Motivation and Emotions*, Vol.29 No.3, pp165-188

Wise, L (2000) The public service culture in Stillman, RJ (eds) *Public administration: concepts and cases*, 7th edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Wright, B, Christensen, R and

Iseet, K (2013) Motivated to adapt? The role of public service motivation as employees face organisational change, *Public Administration Review*, Vol.23 No.5, pp238-247